

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 2007		2. REPORT TYPE final		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE How Taiwan's status is resolved will determine whether U.S.-China relations are cooperative or hostile				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Roger Cliff; David Shlapak				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) RAND Corporation,1776 Main Street,Santa Monica,CA,90401-3208				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER RAND/RB-226-AF	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Captain James Malcom, HQ USAF/A8XP, Room 4D1083, 1070 Air Force Pentagon, Washington, DC, 20330-1070				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Online access: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB226/ Summarizes RAND/MG-567-AF: U.S.-China relations after resolution of Taiwan's status					
14. ABSTRACT Depending on how Taiwan's status is resolved, U.S.-China relations could range from friendly cooperation to cold war. As China's military capabilities grow, it will be increasingly important-and increasingly difficult-for the United States to both prevent an attempt at violent reunification and maintain the capability to defeat it.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 1	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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How Taiwan's Status Is Resolved Will Determine Whether U.S.-China Relations Are Cooperative or Hostile

At present, the most obvious and likely source of conflict between the United States and China is Taiwan. Although the United States has not had a formal defense treaty with Taiwan since 1979, it has an ongoing commitment to Taiwan's security and has been the island's principal protector against Chinese threats since 1950. Resolution of Taiwan's status, however, would not necessarily eliminate the possibility of tension or even conflict between Washington and Beijing. Indeed, the effect of an end to the cross-strait standoff on Sino-U.S. ties will be strongly conditioned by *what* that resolution is and *how* it came about.

A RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) study examines the ways in which Taiwan's status could be resolved and how the events surrounding that resolution would likely shape the subsequent U.S.-China relationship. There are, broadly speaking, ten different logical possibilities for trajectories that the cross-strait relationship could follow. Four of them are peaceful:

- continuation of the current unresolved status quo
- peaceful unification
- peaceful independence
- a compromise resolution.

Six involve Chinese use of force against Taiwan:

- violent unification with U.S. intervention
- violent unification without U.S. intervention
- violent independence with U.S. intervention
- violent independence without U.S. intervention
- violent irresolution with U.S. intervention
- violent irresolution without U.S. intervention.

Looking across all these cases reveals that simply assuming that the Taiwan situation has

Abstract

Depending on how Taiwan's status is resolved, U.S.-China relations could range from friendly cooperation to cold war. As China's military capabilities grow, it will be increasingly important—and increasingly difficult—for the United States to both prevent an attempt at violent reunification and maintain the capability to defeat it.

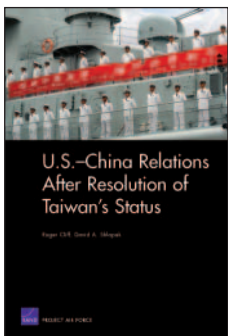
been “resolved” is hardly enough to understand the nature of the subsequent security relationship between China and the United States. Instead, the manner and mode in which the Taiwan question is decided will make a great deal of difference. To the extent one can generalize, the obvious appears to be true: The consequences of peaceful outcomes—including continued peaceful irresolution—are both more predictable and generally better for relations between Washington and Beijing.

In contrast, nonpeaceful resolutions of Taiwan's status could cause U.S.-China relations to fall anywhere from reasonable amity to a cold war—like confrontation, depending on the circumstances surrounding the conflict and its outcome. Only a fundamentally pragmatic Chinese government is likely to recognize Taiwan as an independent country, so if the resolution of Taiwan's status results in formal independence for Taiwan, subsequent U.S.-China relations will likely be cooperative. If the result is forcible unification for Taiwan, the United States and China will likely find themselves in a hostile cold war. A war over Taiwan that left its status unresolved would also be likely to result in a prolonged and severe deterioration of U.S.-China

relations, although this deterioration would not necessarily be as severe as if China had won the war and forced Taiwan to unify with the mainland.

For more than 25 years, U.S. policy has, above all else, sought to ensure that any resolution of Taiwan's status occurs peacefully. The implication of the findings of this study is

that, as China's power and confidence in its military capabilities grow and therefore the possibility of Beijing attempting to bring about unification through force increases, preventing such an attempt from occurring while maintaining the capability to defeat it will become increasingly important even as it becomes increasingly difficult. ■



This research brief describes work done for RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *U.S.-China Relations After Resolution of Taiwan's Status*, by Roger Cliff and David A. Shlapak, MG-567-AF (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG567/>), 2007, 38 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8330-4036-7. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND®** is a registered trademark.

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